

# The Angel with a Hoof: Metamorphosis in Golding's *The Spire*

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The motif of *metamorphosis* in Golding's *The Spire* (1964) is closely connected with the main theme of the novel: the fight between angelic and demonic forces within an unwary man. This paper tries to show the significance of the moment of *metamorphosis* (when the seeming angel puts out his hoof from beneath his wings and strikes his victim) for the theme of the novel and explain in what sense it is the crucial turning point of the plot.

The second aim of the present study is to point out that the treatment of the *devil* motif in *The Spire* is an example of Golding's way of using symbols, and particularly symbols of evil: it is characteristic that these motifs are in accordance with theological concepts of *transcendent* evil and at the same time can be understood on a "natural" (or *realistic*) level (without theological presuppositions).

Though the story is set in the Middle Ages, the conceptions included in it are modern; in a way we feel it takes place outside time. The protagonist, Dean Jocelin, has a vision in his cathedral, after which he becomes obsessed with the idea of building a high spire on the tower of the building (modelled on Salisbury). He is confronted with all sorts of obstacles: it is found out that the cathedral is built on muddy soil without sufficient foundations. In a chain of tragic events he sacrifices to his obsessive idea the four people who are closest to him (three of them die, the fourth is ruined in all human aspects), all his church duties towards his congregation, his health, his faith, ultimately his life.

The focus of the text is on the main character's becoming a battle-field in the fight between angelic and satanic forces. The focus nevertheless is on the evil forces, which first appear dimly, then their contours become more defined, until they assume the distinct likeness of the *devil*. Before dominating the protagonist's feelings and darkening his mind with madness, Satan approaches him first in confusing, seemingly harmless appearances. He comes in the disguise of an *angel*; it is possible, though, to detect who he really is by the effects of his influence: for he consoles where he should admonish, and encourages where he should warn.

There is a parallel between Jocelin's building of the spire and the development of his own spiritual life. The spire built on muddy soil without sufficient foundations is bound to fall down, while the protagonist's prayer lacks the solid support of humility and devotion. What he considers to be God's will is in fact his own pride, or *superbia*. He mistakes his euphoric feelings and contemptuous attitude towards others for charity. He does not try to "discern the spirits", to find the background of his *angel*.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, he clings to his intention, destroying ultimately not only his life, but also the lives of the people he loves most. (The four people he sacrifices to his intention are in the novel compared to the four supporting pillars that carry the weight of the spire.)

The unique quality of the novel lies in the way Golding manages to present his protagonist as an active agent of the tragic entanglement, bringing it about by his pride, and at

the same time as a passive victim of fatal coincidences and perhaps also metaphysical forces.<sup>2</sup> Thus the novel seems to illustrate in a masterful way contemporary philosophical concepts concerning evil as consisting of both voluntary components (including human will) and involuntary ones.<sup>3</sup>

Let us consider now the main agent of Jocelin's development: his *angel*, and the importance of the moment of *metamorphosis* for the theme of the novel. (It is interesting that the term *angel* has been suggested as a keyword by all eight major critics of Golding).<sup>4</sup>

The first time Jocelin is confronted with the *angel* comes as early as in the exposition, in Chapter I, when he is praying in the cathedral:

And then, quite suddenly, he knew he was not alone. It was not that he saw or heard a presence. He felt it, like the warmth of a fire at his back, powerful and gentle at the same time; and so immediate was the pressure of that personality, it might have been in his very spine.

He bent his head in terror, hardly breathing. He allowed the presence to do what it would. I am here, the presence seemed to say, do nothing, we are here, and all work together for good.

Then he dared to think again, in the warmth at his back.

It is my guardian angel. (1965: 22)

Very soon, though, the *angel's* influence becomes dubious, because he comforts and encourages Jocelin even, for example, after the dean is warned by the master builder that it is impossible to build the spire for lack of foundations or after Jocelin has a breakout with his confessor and ceases to take the sacrament of confession.

Later Jocelin realizes that his "daughter in God", a young woman he has always been fond of, and the master builder are attracted to each other and will soon start a love affair, which would destroy their lives as both of them are married. At first Jocelin abhors the thought of adultery, but immediately comes the crucial moment of his development: he deliberately gives his inner consent to the situation and thus consciously sacrifices the two people he likes most to his intention of building the spire:

Then the thought leapt into his mind like a live thing. It was put there as surely as the thrust of a spear. [...] The tiles of the floor were before him once more, each with two heraldic beasts, their clawed feet raised to strike, their snakey necks entwined. [...] The thought [...] was so terrible that it went beyond feeling, and left him inspecting it with a kind of stark detachment, while the edge of the spire burnt against his cheek. It was so terrible and so allaying to all other feeling that he had to give it words as his eyes examined the linked creatures on the floor before him:

"She will keep him there." (1965: 63-64)

This is a real turning point in the novel: a moment of *evil choice*, which from now on influences Jocelin's life and his personality.<sup>5</sup> The allusion to the beasts on the tiles is not coincidental: the author brings the reader to the dark domain that now prevails in Jocelin's mind. The short sentence includes three expressions that are in Golding's works specifically connoted with devil-like forces: *beast*, *claws* (in 'clawed feet') and *snake* (in 'snakey necks'), to suggest that Jocelin is now fully entering the realm of evil.<sup>6</sup>

It is very significant that even in the situation of evident option for evil (the decision to instrumentalize and manipulate persons to whom he is expected to be a pastor and an authority), Jocelin's *angel* still encourages him. In the same page we read: 'Then at last his

angel came back and warmed him so that he was somewhat comforted and the picture and the thought endurable. [...] And the angel warmed him' (1965: 64).

Here it is very noticeable how the *angel* instead of making it clear to Jocelin how disastrous his instrumental attitude to the other people is, he makes 'the picture and the thought [of it] endurable'. In this way the *angel* supports Jocelin in shifting the burden of his task onto others, especially the master builder, Goody, and their spouses, who are thus becoming the four pillars bearing the weight of the spire. Still, the dean in his "folly" never has doubts concerning the identity of the *angel*.

As the plot develops, the effect of the *angel* on Jocelin's life becomes more ambiguous. The main shift comes (in Chapter VI) when the dean for the first time notices that his *angel* is 'at once a blessing and great wearisomeness to him' (1965: 124). From that time on the *angel's* coming is usually accompanied by what Jocelin perceives as influence of the *devil* so that the terms *angel* and *devil* become associated. They are still recognized by Jocelin as separate entities but the effect of both in his life becomes increasingly negative:

Often, his angel stood at his back; and this exhausted him, for the angel was a great weight of glory to bear, and bent his spine. Moreover, after a visit by the angel—as if to keep him in humility—Satan was given leave to torment him, seizing him by the loins [...] (1965: 138).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Jocelin himself begins to notice more intensively the inner contradiction of his own activities and the ambiguity of the spiritual forces concentrated round him and the spire. This happens especially after he realizes that "the cost of the spire" includes the horrible death of Goody, who he loved and wanted to protect more than any other human being, and, moreover, Jocelin's own loss of faith. When he discovers that even the workmen he trusted are devil-worshippers, he becomes aware of the dual quality of his experience: the crossways of the cathedral, where he once had his divine vision, becomes related to hell:

He went halting down the ladders without seeing them; and the story [of his life...] burned before his mind; and at the crossways, the replaced paving stones were hot to his feet with all the fires of hell (1965: 157).

The main turning point of the novel, the *metamorphosis* that puts an end to Jocelin's blindness, is preceded by another mystical episode, which reveals to Jocelin, how much the spiritual atmosphere of the spire, and the whole cathedral, has changed for him. During a thunderstorm and a gale the spire is in danger of falling and people gather round Jocelin's house fearing the destruction of the whole city. The dean decides to go and fix to the spire the "holy nail" that he received from Rome and which he believes will protect the spire from ruin. The following passage is one of the most mystical in Golding's work. And it is not only the storm and the wind Jocelin has to fight:

Yet for a moment as he leaned there he thought the cathedral had a full congregation. But then he realised that the lights were swimming inside his eyes, and the singing was the noise of all the devils out of hell. They swarmed through the dim heights, they banged and rattled and smashed at the windows in an extravagance of fury, [...] But he minded them no more than birds as they swooped at him, for he was outside himself, awake and asleep at the same time, a man led. Wah! Wah! they howled, and Yah! Yah! they howled beating at him with scaly wings then going off to batter at the singing pillars and the windows and the vaulting that shuddered over; and he heard someone, himself perhaps,

imitating their cries as his body ran crouching up the nave through the semi-darkness. (1965: 175)

Jocelin succeeds in fixing the nail and comes back. He still experiences the demonic presence:

The devils still had possession of the nave though the spire was safe from them. But he was not safe from them himself. His angel left him, and the sweetness of his devil was laid on him like a hot hand. (1965: 177)

This episode makes it apparent that there are negative spiritual forces concentrated about the spire, the cathedral, and the dean's personality. Yet it is followed by a revelation which is shocking for the protagonist and the reader alike. Jocelin still believes in the positive influence of his *angel* when he is standing in the crossways of the cathedral and trying to make a total sacrifice of his personality to make up for the disastrous results of his selfishness. At that moment he experiences the *angel's metamorphosis*:

Then his angel put away the two wings from the cloven hoof and struck him from arse to the head with a white-hot flail. It filled his spine with a sick fire and he shrieked because he could not bear it yet he knew he would have to. At some point there were clumsy hands that tried to pick him up; but he could not tell them of the flail because of the way his body threw itself round the crossways like a broken snake. So the body shrieked and the hands fought with him and under the heap was Jocelin who knew that at least one good prayer had been answered.

When the pain ebbed he found they were carrying him back from the place of the sacrifice with careful hands. He lay on an absence of back and waited. [...] Sometimes the angel left him so that he could think. (1965: 188-189)

This episode amounts to the moment of tragic *discovery (anagnorisis)* described by Aristotle in his *Poetics* as the main turning point of classical tragedy (1963: 19-21). It is a climax of Jocelin's psychological and spiritual development. It reveals that all the time Jocelin has been subtly deceived. At the same moment when the *angel* turns into a *devil*, Jocelin also undergoes cardinal spiritual and existential *metamorphosis*: he gets rid of his egotism and for the first time he is able to offer his self for the sake of others. It is significant that the event is termed *sacrifice*. The simile of the 'broken snake' reminds of the biblical myth of the fall from Genesis 3, and can suggest that the dark, egotistic, manipulating aspect of Jocelin's personality is destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

The episode is very mystical; on the other hand it can also be looked upon as a new stage in Jocelin's illness, probably spine tuberculosis, which also explains preceding feelings of warmth at his back, which he recognizes as the influence of his *angel*.

From this time on the term *angel* appears several times and is almost invariably accompanied by the attribute *dark*: 'Then the dark angel struck him' (1965: 198). Strikes of the angel can be understood as tormenting attacks of (consuming) spine tuberculosis. In the final part of the novel the evil agent is referred to only as 'black wings', which suggests even more mystical atmosphere.

The events following the *metamorphosis* are given in the final two chapters (XI-XII), which represent the catharsis of the main character's drama. In this way even the structure of the novel emphasizes the crucial importance of the *metamorphosis*. In this turning point the process of the main character's self-recognition, which is the main theme of the novel, reaches its climax.

Let us consider now Golding's way of treating symbols, in particular symbols of evil. It will be illustrated on *The Spire* and his bestknown work, *Lord of the Flies*, but it must be pointed out that this phenomenon can also be found in other novels, especially those written in the first half of his creative life (*Pincher Martin*, *Free Fall*, *Darkness Visible*).

As mentioned above, the mystical *metamorphosis* is described in a way that fully corresponds to the experience of mystical classics and with theological concepts of the *devil*. At the same time it is fully explicable by natural causes (without theological presuppositions) as a stroke of spine tuberculosis, the presence of the *angel-devil* being explained by the devotion of the protagonist (who always looks upon his life in religious terms) and by his extreme psychological (and existential) condition. This approach to symbolic motifs, and especially to the *devil* symbol, is typical of Golding. It is possible to say that his novels can be read on (what I call) a *transcendent level* or on a "natural", or *realistic, level*.

The *devil* is often personified in a symbol, which, nevertheless, also has the function of a concrete real object. For example in the most famous novel, *Lord of the Flies*, the crucial passage is Simon's dialogue with pig's head on a stick, called 'Lord of the Flies'. This expression is a literal translation of Hebrew Baalzebub and it is the personification of evil. The dialogue can be understood on a *transcendent level* as the *devil* making himself visible to Simon. At the same time the dialogue can be explained by Simon's illness (probably epilepsy), so that the whole episode can be read on a *realistic level* as an epileptic hallucination. (1970 [1954]: 157-159). Similarly, in *The Spire* the *devils* in the cathedral can be understood on a *transcendent level* as a sign that demonic forces are truly in possession of the cathedral and trying to get hold of Jocelin's personality or on a *realistic level* as figments of the dean's ill condition.

It is possible to conclude that this way of using imagery, particularly symbols of evil, may be one of the keys to the secret of Golding's impressiveness. His texts always suggest, never explain away. Therefore they are very open to various readings, analyses, discussions, and interpretations. And no matter how we read and analyze them, there is always enough space for mystery and inconclusion.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jocelin's daring recklessness concerning the background of his *angel* has been criticized by medieval specialists as improbable: 'He drives ahead, pushed by his "angel", never examining himself, as a medieval prelate would, as to the side, heaven or hell, from which the angel came' (Sutherland 1969: 57).

<sup>2</sup> Besides, this mutual tension between the free will of the protagonist on the one hand, and fatal forces on the other, is typical of Greek tragedy.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the works of Jean Ricoeur and Mircea Eliade.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cleve 1986: 151. There are only four terms in *The Spire* that have been suggested as keywords by all eight critics (*vision, angel, tree, and chosen*).

<sup>5</sup> The evil choice is a moment that becomes almost an obsession in Golding's works. It can be found in *Lord of the Flies* and *Darkness Visible*. In *Free Fall* the main theme is the protagonist's looking for this moment of option for evil that was decisive for his personality. In *Pincher Martin* Golding shows how the main character's personality is the result of a series of *evil choices*, which he repeats over and over again until he becomes what could be called "an incarnation of greed".

<sup>6</sup> The words *snake* and *beast* have biblical connotations: the association of *snake* with the *devil* in Genesis 3 is well known. Concerning Golding's work, for example in *Lord of the*

*Flies the beast*, as it is widely known, is a personification of dark forces. The term *beast* is used in the Apocalypse for the embodiment of evil. The context with the Apocalypse is apparent even more from the expressions *beast from the sea*, *beast from the earth* (Rev, chapters 13-14), which are used in *Lord of the Flies* as chapter names (slightly varied as 'Beast from Water', 'Beast from Air'). In the same novel, the most explicitly cruel episode, where Simon is virtually torn to pieces by a group of maddened boys, is described as: 'There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws' (*Lord of the Flies* 168). In *Pincher Martin* the protagonist's perverted egotism is concentrated in his *claws*, which are the only thing that remains of him even after his death: 'There was nothing but the centre and the claws. They were huge and strong and inflamed to red. They were outlined like a night sign against the absolute nothingness [...]' (*Pincher Martin* 201).

<sup>7</sup> The ironic contrast between Jocelin's own experiencing the situation and what actually happens brings into the novel grotesque effects. The tragic purport is thus made lighter for the reader by humorous effects, and at the same time emphasized: 'The angel was a great weight of glory to bear and bent his spine' is an example of Golding's ironic treatment of Jocelin's point of view.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that this kind of spiritual deception has important precedents in theological classics. For example St Augustin in his *Confessions* speaks about many people having been deceived when looking for an intercessor to purify them. But it was Satan who transformed himself into an angel of light. (Augustinus Aurelius 1990: 370). The medieval legends about Francis of Assisi collected in the book of *Flowers* include a story of one of St. Francis' fellow-brothers having repeated visions of a devil disguised as Christ, who tempts him to believe he is predestined for damnation. Finally he is advised by Francis to tell the ghost (who had Christ's appearance): 'Open your mouth and I will crap in it', which makes the devil withdraw (*Kvítiky* 1942: 89-93).

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